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U.S. and Soviets Flexed Muscles In '80 Facedown

Locked in secret Pentagon files are the startling details of a Soviet-American facedown over Iran in August, 1980, a confrontation so fraught with risk that it produced rumblings of nuclear reprisals.

The Soviets began building up their forces along the Iranian border in 1980. According to Soviet intelligence cables intercepted by the National Security Agency, the Kremlin anticipated a U.S. military move against Iran in October, 1980.

The intercepted cables indicated that as early as July the Soviets had detected preparations by the United States for military action in Iran. The cables alerted Soviet outposts that then-President Carter was planning an "October coup" in Iran and warned that the Soviet Union would have to meet force with force.

As a show of strength, the Kremlin bolstered its military forces on the Iranian border and put them through some ominous exercises. These were described by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in a top-secret report:

"In August, 1980, an unusually long and complex [Soviet] General Staff-controlled post exercise featur-

ing a mock national Soviet invasion of Iran was held in the transborder area. A complex, theater-level command, control, and communications system was deployed and tested; contingency plans were developed, evaluated and updated; and high-level commanders and staffs rehearsed roles in an invasion scenario."

Evidently, this was intended as a warning to Carter to abandon his "October coup," a term that kept recurring in the Soviet cables to describe the expected U.S. action in Iran.

Carter had taken the precaution of asking the Defense Intelligence Agency to "study and report on possible Soviet military reactions to various scenarios in which the United States forces have invaded Iran." The DIA concluded that the Soviets would intervene.

The DIA warning and the Soviet maneuvers apparently persuaded Carter to give up the idea of a military operation against Iran. He called upon the joint chiefs, however, to prepare various military options in case the Soviets carried out an invasion of Iran.

One ominous proposal, called the "limited strategic option," would have authorized the commander of the Rapid Deployment Force to use 19 nuclear bombs delivered by B52 bombers against invading Russians. But the idea of limited nuclear war-

fare confined to Iran, critics warned, was a dream that could turn into a nightmare.

Even as the Soviet juggernaut was staging its mock invasion of Iran, I reported on Aug. 18, 1980, that Carter was preparing to attack Iran. "The ostensible purpose," I wrote, "is to rescue the [American] hostages, but the operation would also exact military retribution."

The question of publishing this classified material was the thornier because it dealt with military operations still in preparation. But I hoped to restrain Carter, whose course, I warned, "would risk war with the Soviet Union." A Soviet-American confrontation over Iran, I warned, "could become the opening skirmish of World War III."

My associate Dale Van Atta learned that the National Security Agency had picked up intercepts that dealt with a massive Soviet buildup on the Iranian border. I reported on Sept. 22 that Russia had "at least 23 divisions in position to move into Iran.... What has alarmed U.S. analysts more than the quantity of the Soviet buildup near Iran is the quality of the forces arrayed there."

The White House denied my reports. But the important thing was that the incendiary action was canceled, a dangerous confrontation was avoided and the American hostages eventually were returned.